

## distance by kittenCorrosion

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Angst, Awkward Romance, Comfort, Cuddling, Don't Stop Me Now, F/M, Fluff, Happy Ending, Self-Loathing, also mike can't draw to save his life, basically it's cute and then angsty and then angsty cute, cute af, nightmare and comfort, poor baby i cry over her and her pain so much she doesn't deserve to hurt, ptsd el, really long sorry it wasn't supposed to get this long but WHATEVER

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Eleven (Stranger Things), Jonathan Byers, Karen Wheeler, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

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**Summary:**

two stories about not allowing one's self to say, "i love you" and one story about doing it anyways.

part i. 1984

part ii. 1986

part iii. 1988

inspired by christina perri's "distance"

## distance

### Author's Note:

first of all go listen to the damn song because it's really good okay.

i've always loved christina perri's music (i have like seven different ones on my various mike and /or eleven playlists) but this one just really made me think of all the years they refused to tell each other how they felt because they didn't feel good enough or worthy enough or that it would be fair.

i love my angsty kids.

also i'm saying this is necessarily part of my canon, but the junior prom 2.0 story is kind of what i based the last part off of so take it as you will.

I.

*The sun is filling up the room  
And I can hear you dreaming  
Do you feel the way I do right now?  
I wish we would just give up  
Cause the best part is falling  
Call it anything but love*

Morning was breaking and a sunbeam gently caressed Mike's face, warming his eyelids and waking him up. With a sigh he shifted, eyes snapping open as his hand brushed soft, downy curls. Oh right.

It had been about a week since El had reappeared, stumbling through the freezing February night and back into his arms. They'd built her a giant fort in the basement around the couch, for her to sleep in while the adults figured out what to do with her. Sometimes she'd come upstairs if she felt scared or lonely and he would give her his bed, crashing on the floor as she snuggled up in his sheets, hanging her hand off the bed to tangle with his for comfort.

But last night had been different.

It was nearing three A.M. and he didn't know what exactly had made him wake up, but he'd jolted upright, the frigid wind howling against his window like a shrieking demon. His SuperCom was buzzing with static, he didn't remember turning it on, and through the filmy hum he heard her whisper.

*"Mike?"*

It was so quiet he was sure he'd imagined it, blinking into the darkness towards his desk where the walkie-talkie sat crackling. Then there was a whimper.

*"Please."*

It was her voice, and it sounded broken, the shards piercing Mike's heart as he whipped the blankets off of himself and ran for the Com, stubbing his toe on his desk and cursing under his breath. He snatched it up, pressing the button and bringing it to his lips.

"El? Are you okay?"

The only answer was another whimper. He didn't hesitate, dropping the walkie-talkie back onto the desk and turning and heading for the door, trying to hush his footsteps but moving as quickly down the stairs as possible. The basement door was still cracked open and he pushed it out of the way, thudding down the wooden staircase.

He could hear soft sobs from inside the giant fort, crossing the floor quickly, the cement like ice under his bare feet. He didn't notice, focused on the eyes that now glinted at him from inside the swath of blankets, wet with tears.

"El?"

There was a shudder of breath.

"M-Mike," her voice was barely a whisper, "b-bad. The water. And Papa."

He hesitated, unsure of whether or not he should approach when she

looked so fearful, but her eyes were begging, hand reaching out to him and it took him all of four seconds to grasp it and let himself be pulled into the darkened tent, arms wrapping around her as she shivered and shook and let the fear pour out. He had been standing at first, leaning against the couch as he held her, but somehow she'd pulled him down and he ended up sitting on the couch as she curled into chest, hands fisting into the front of his old Star Wars pajama shirt, legs tucked beneath her. Holding her to him tightly, he tried to figure out what to say, how to comfort her from the nightmare that had paralyzed her with fear.

"It's okay, El," he murmured quietly, "you're safe here. You're safe. They can't get you now."

*I won't let them hurt you again,* he added silently.

It took a few more minutes of quiet reassurances before she could unlatch herself from him, wiping at her wet face with the blanket, seeming suddenly embarrassed and moving back away from him a bit.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, looking down at her hands.

"For what?"

"Waking you up."

He shook his head, brow furrowed.

"Don't be. You were afraid. That's... more important."

His face flushed, and he was glad it was too dark for her to see the blush that was creeping up his neck and across his face. She was silent as she took his words in and he shifted a bit, trying to scoot out from under her, feeling like maybe he was too close. Her hand fell on his wrist, stopping him.

"Stay?"

He could only see a glint of her eyes, the dim light catching the unspoken plea and with a sigh settled back down.

“If you want me to...”

“Yes... please?” she scooted herself over, allowing him to find a more comfortable position before nestling back into his arms.

There was no way he was going to refuse, and as she settled her head against his chest he let out a content sigh, relieved she felt okay again. He felt a bit awkward, he'd never really cuddled anyone before let alone someone he liked, and he wasn't entirely sure where to put his hands. Glancing down at her he felt his heart speed up a bit, palms beginning to sweat at the realization that the girl he'd kissed, the one he'd pined over for months, the one who's soft smiles and quiet words made him dizzy, was snuggled up in his arms.

*How am I supposed to sleep like this?* He wondered as he glanced down at her again, positive he would be too afraid of disturbing her to fall asleep.

El's breathing slowed, the panic and terror that had filled her only minutes before banished by the gentle lull of his heartbeat in her ear. Her hand was tucked into her chest, body relaxed as the emotional and physical exhaustion overwhelmed her and sent her back into a peaceful sleep. Mike listened to her soft snoring, the rhythmic respirations sweeter than a lullaby, calming his heart rate until, rather suddenly, he fell asleep.

Waking up to the sunlight that was now flooding the basement, he wondered how he'd managed to end up with his face in the only place the blanket fort didn't shadow, blinking and shifting his vision away from the sun, looking down at El, still cuddled up on his chest.

She was still asleep, the hand that had been tucked into her chest now thrown across his waist, hair caught in her mouth, a large, wet spot on his shirt from where she'd drooled on him. He decided she was the most adorable thing he'd ever seen in his life. Her hand suddenly clenched, lips mumbling something too soft to understand, and he watched as she smiled in her sleep. A good dream then.

He didn't want to wake her up, but he was afraid of what his mom would think if she came down and found them like this, so he steeled himself before bringing a hand up and gently shaking her shoulder.

“El.”

“Nnnmmphh.”

He grinned, unable to think her sleepy noise of disapproval was anything but totally cute.

“Wake up, El,” he said, voice gentle, shaking her again and watching as she slowly blinked her eyes open, squinting against the harsh sunlight.

She sat up a bit, her curls a wild mess around her head as she turned to look at him, eyes still half-lidded and full of sleep. Blinking a bit more she realized her position, well, his position, and her mind remembered last night. Gratitude replaced the hazy drowsiness, and she smiled brighter than the sunlight filling the room. Mike’s heart clenched, a heavier, unknown feeling filling his chest as he smiled back, not entirely understanding the emotion that made him want to wrap his arms around her and pull her face to his, eyes glancing at her lips subconsciously.

They hadn’t kissed since the night she came back, that particular touch initiated by her frozen lips. He’d been too afraid, unsure of where they stood now, unsure if she even fully understood what it meant. The last thing he wanted to do was overwhelm her now that she was back. She deserved to figure out more about life, about how people could be kind and loving, how there were good things, better things than even the Eggos she’d consumed during her first week of freedom. Better things than his kiss.

He owed that to her, for saving his life, but in this moment he felt like throwing that quiet ideology out the window, leaning forward a bit towards her. Her eyes were drowning him, hazel-brown quicksand that swallowed him in instant, but he didn’t mind, noticing how she leaned forward too.

“El? Mike?”

Karen Wheeler’s voice sounded from up the stairs and the two kids jolted apart, ending up on opposite sides of the couch, El still clutching the blanket around her shoulders, knees scrunched up to

her chin. Mike pulled his legs back too, making sure even their feet weren't touching as his mom came down the stairs, peering into the blanket-couch-fort with surveying eyes.

"Mike, what are you doing down here?"

"Um," he grabbed a quick lie out of the back of his mind, "I woke up early and came to say good morning to El."

Karen raised her eyebrow, looking between the two.

"And did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Say good morning?"

He tried not to flush but couldn't help it, staring at the D&D table instead of his mom's skeptical face. She read him too easily.

"Um, not yet..." he muttered, wishing she would stop looking at him like that.

"Well why don't you then, so you can go upstairs and get ready for school?"

She didn't have to tell him that he shouldn't be down here alone, her tone said enough, and with an annoyed sigh he got up off the couch and stalked over to the staircase, setting one foot on the bottom stair before turning back El, realizing he should at least try and round out the lie he'd told.

"Um, good morning, El," he mumbled.

She smiled at him and his heart did that thumping, shivery, clenchy thing again, the thing he didn't know how to describe. He couldn't keep himself from smiling back as she replied, voice sweet.

"Good morning, Mike."

*And I will make sure to keep my distance*

*Say, "I love you," when you're not listening  
And how long can we keep this up, up, up?*

## II.

*Please don't stand so close to me  
I'm having trouble breathing  
I'm afraid of what you'll see right now  
I give you everything I am  
All my broken heart beats  
Until I know you'll understand*

It was double-feature Thursday on a late June night and El watched from her place on the bench as the mobs of people besieged the small Hawkins theater. There were only three screens and she glanced at her watch again as she waited, the other hand tugging at one of her curls, pulling it nervously as she scanned the incoming faces for her... friend.

*It's not a date,* she reminded herself again, *friends can go and see movies.*

Despite the countless times she'd repeated that mantra it hadn't kept her from occupying the bathroom most of the day, applying and reapplying her makeup, blow-drying and attempting to hair spray her hair into submission, and changing her outfit four times before letting Jonathan give her ride over to the theater. It had been ridiculous and everyone in the Byers house knew it, but thankfully they'd been smart enough not to say anything as she tried her best to look "nice". She refused to admit that she was trying to do anything more than that.

*Friends can look nice if they want to,* she had argued with herself as



she'd thrown half of her closet onto the floor in frustration, *it's okay to look nice*.

But now she crossed her legs, tugging at her favorite yellow sundress and bouncing her pink Chuck-clad foot in the air. The movie was going to start in ten minutes and there was still no sign of...

"Mike!"

She spotted his freckled face towering above the crowd as he ducked out of the station wagon, wacking his head on door frame and grabbing the back of it as he stood up to his full height. She winced in sympathy, but relief flooded her stomach as she stood and called out to him, smiling and waving. His eyes dodged through the mass of people, lighting up as they finally found her, and he turned to say something to his dad in the driver's seat before shutting the door and heading her way. She fought the urge to throw herself into his arms—*friends don't need to hug all the time*—settling for reaching out and squeezing his wrist as he came up to her, looking up at his apologetic face.

"Sorry, El, Nancy was supposed to bring me but then Steve and Jonathan came over and I had to convince my dad to wake up and give me a ride but I had to promise to mow the lawn for the next two months, which, uh, is fine, um..." he rambled in his usual awkward way and she smiled, letting her eyes laugh at his flustered words. He glanced at his ever-present calculator-watch and did a double-take at the time.

"Oh shit, the movie!"

He grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the ticketbooth, tall frame easily making its way through the crowd, not noticing how his touch had made her leave her heart behind on the bench she'd been standing in front of. The line wasn't too terribly long, and as he stopped, still holding her hand, he turned to her, grinning widely.

"You ready for..." he made his face go slack, voice deadpan, "*Bueller. Bueller.*"

"Um," she giggled at his impression, glancing down at their

intertwined hands, “yes?”

It was a natural move, there had been dark nights and rough terrain that had made him reach for her hand before, but friends didn't hold hands in line at the movie theater... did they? He realized what she was looking at and dropped her hand like fire, flushing before turning to face the ticketbooth, where a bored-looking, blonde girl about their age sat. At the sight of Mike's face she perked up, interested.

“Um, two double-feature tickets for Ferris Bueller and Invaders from Mars?”

He glanced back at El with a smile, still flushed.

“Mike—” El started to say but was interrupted by the ticket girl.

“Ferris Bueller is sold out.”

“*Crap*, are you serious?” Mike's smile dropped right off his face.

El tried again.

“Mike, I—”

“What's the other movie?” He seemed a bit frantic and the girl popped her gum, smiling brightly at having his interest turned towards her again. El narrowed her eyes, noticing the cute blonde's expression, feeling something in her gut clench.

“Cobra,” the girl pointed at the poster behind her head, “with Stallone.”

“Do you just want to see Invaders then, El? Gosh, sorry, I got here so late we missed the movie you actually wanted to see...”

“*Mike.*”

He finally stopped and looked at her as she held up her tickets with a smile. His face fell and she felt hers do the same.

“Oh. You... already got your tickets,” he swallowed.

He sounded disappointed and she felt her heart sink. She'd done something wrong. The girl in the booth cleared her throat, looking almost smug as she glanced between the two teens in front of her.

"So it's not date, you still want your ticket, hon?" Her voice was sickly sweet and Mike looked confused, turning back to El with his mouth open, unsure of what to say. El didn't give him a chance to respond.

"Here," She pushed past him, handing her ticket for Ferris Bueller over to the girl, "can I switch for Cobra?"

"Yeah, sure, whatever," she sniffed as El scooted back over so Mike could come forward with his money and the other teen smirked, claiming her tepid victory, "so that's one double-feature for Cobra and Invaders?"

Mike nodded, still looking a bit glum, and exchanged his money for the tickets, not noticing how the blonde let her hand brush his as she handed him his change. She gave El another snooty glance as they walked away and El tried not to let it get to her. A friend would be happy if another friend caught the interest of a cute girl... but she definitely was not happy, her gut feeling hot and shaky instead. What was that feeling?

Her stomach rumbled then and she decided she was just hungry, she'd been too on-edge all day and hadn't really eaten, but she realized they didn't have time to stand in line for popcorn, instead heading towards the screen playing Invaders with a sigh. Mike noticed her longing and slowed his pace.

"Did you want some popcorn?" he asked as he stopped right outside their theater, "the line isn't too long..."

"The movie already started," she double-tapped her pink calculator-watch, her first birthday gift from Mike after her return, and gave him a half-smile, "I don't want you to miss it."

He shook his head frantically.

"No no, it's fine. Why don't you go in and I'll grab a bucket to share

or something. They have Pepsi..." he knew she hated Coke.

"But you wanted to see--"

"It's fine, go in and pick the seats, okay?"

She started to protest but he was gone before she could get anything out, long legs carrying him across the lobby quickly as he joined the line for concessions. He saw her watching and motioned for her to head in, smiling encouragingly. Hiding her small smile at his determination, she turned and headed in, trying not to let the accusing eyes of those already in the theater make her feel too ashamed of being so late. The only seats left next to each other were high up in the very back, near the edge of the row, and she quickly hustled up the stairs and plopped into one, hoping Mike would appear soon. The movie had started but she wasn't too interested in the panicked humans discovering the aliens, instead ruminating on why Mike had seemed so disappointed when she'd showed him her tickets.

*Was he going to buy them for me?* The thought puzzled her. There was no reason for him to do so, she had her allowance and always bought her own ticket when she'd come before. *Why would he want to do that? It's not like this is a date.* Miss Snot-Nosed Blonde had made that pretty clear. She tried not to think about it, it only made her ribcage feel shivery with unknown anxiety.

A few minutes later she spotted his awkwardly tall frame appear in a flood of light from the hall and tried to wave him up towards their seats, feeling bad for once again disturbing the other moviegoers. He spotted her, bounding up the steps eagerly, way too quickly for his legs to coordinate. She watched in amazed horror as he tripped, toe catching on the edge of a step, and fell, dumping the entire bucket of popcorn on the ground. Part of her wanted to laugh, his wipeout had been absolutely hysterical, but she was worried he was hurt... and she was sad. She'd wanted that popcorn.

He bounced right back up like it was nothing, trying to scoop the mess back into the bucket before giving up and leaving the scattered popcorn on the stairs, making his way up to her with shoulders slumped in defeat. By the time he finally reached her she'd managed

to hide her disappointment and gestured to the seat she'd saved, watching as he plopped into it with a sigh. His face looked devastated and he leaned into her from the side so he could whisper, breath tickling her ear.

"I, uh, I dropped the popcorn."

She offered him a weak smile, trying to keep the laughter off of her face.

"Um, I saw. But it's okay," she licked her lips hoping she didn't sound insincere, "we can get some more later."

She had to lean in even closer to whisper back, so close that the familiar smell of the laundry detergent Karen used flooded her nose, mixed with the scent of the Old Spice soap Mike showered with. It took all her strength not to bury her face in his neck and just breathe him in. *Friends don't do that*, she remembered harshly, pulling her face away from the temptation.

"Here," he interrupted her thoughts, "I got some peanut M&Ms."

He pulled the crinkly yellow packet out of his pocket and offered it to her. He *knew* she loved chocolate, but peanut M&Ms were quite possibly her favorite. She took it hungrily, tearing the bag open with too much enthusiasm, gasping as the small chocolate pieces went flying in every direction, including all over her, and Mike's, lap.

They both blinked at each other for the a second. First the popcorn, then this? It was too comical to stand and they burst into laughter, quickly stifling it as they were met with several "shhh!"s from those in front of them. El's shoulders were shaking as she tried to be quiet, and she reached down to grab one of the M&Ms that had landed in her lap, shoving it into her mouth with a cheeky smile and making Mike snort out the laugh he'd been holding in.

A disgruntled looking older man in front of them turned and gave them an accusatory glare and the two giggly teens finally managed to quiet down. It didn't take long for Mike to get lost in the movie, he was a sucker for anything sci-fi, even if it was cheesy and the effects were less than stellar. She sighed, still hungry after the few pieces of

candy she'd caught, and spotted a stray, blue M&M tucked into the folds of Mike's shorts. Eyeing it for a moment longer, she gave in, reaching over with quick fingers and snatching it out of his lap.

He *yelped*.

She quickly pulled her hand back, clutching the M&M, face puzzled as he looked at her with wide, surprised eyes. He almost looked upset, but mostly just confused and she furrowed her brows in a silent question. *What did I do?*

"Geez, El, I mean I know we're in the makeout row but you can't just... *do that*," he whispered, voice hoarse.

Now she was even more confused and glanced down the row they were sitting, realizing there were several couples frantically sucking face. *This is the makeout row?* She'd only picked these seats because they were some of the only ones left. His words sunk in and her ears blazed hotly as she realized he thought she had been trying to grab his *crotch*.

With a horrified shake of her head she opened up her hand, showing him the blue piece of candy that sat in her palm, her only explanation. He gazed at it, her true intention dawning on him, face equally horrified as he stuttered out an apology, suddenly unable to look her in the eyes. Turning back to the movie he set his elbows on his knees and buried his face into his hands, internally berating himself for assuming she had tried to do something that was anything but innocent.

El wanted to disappear. Would it be bad to use her powers to make her seat sink through the floor? The embarrassment and sheer *awkwardness* were unbearable and she silently cursed herself for being so thoughtless and idiotic. Sometimes she forgot personal boundaries were thing, she'd never had any until she was almost thirteen, and now she'd gone and alienated the one person in the entire world she wanted to stay close to. The burn of embarrassment stayed on her face as she focused down on her hands tucked firmly into her own lap, ignoring the movie, trying to keep herself from shrinking down like she usually did when felt she did something wrong.

Onscreen two comically bad aliens were arguing with a school teacher about something, and El tried to immerse herself in it to distract from the low-burning anxiety that churned her stomach. The movie was supposed to be scary, but this silly attempt at horror couldn't compare with the Upside Down and the real monster that still occasionally haunted her nightmares. She snorted at the stupidity of it and looked back down at her hands, wishing she could just go home. An elbow nudged her and she glanced out of the side of her eye at Mike, still too embarrassed to look him straight on. He leaned over to her again.

"Sorry I... what I said earlier was stupid and I'm sorry I assumed... *that*," his arm stayed firmly pressed against hers on the shared armrest, pinky carefully intertwining with hers, the touch as reassuring as the gentle tone of his voice, "also..." he held up his other hand, offering her a green M&M with a grin, "...I found another one."

Somehow it was exactly the right thing to do and her face lit up as she shyly took the candy from him and popped it into her mouth. All the awkwardness and tensity that had weighed heavily between them was suddenly gone and El sighed in relief, looking down at their hands, wishing she could sneak her fingers into his palm but knowing better. Neither of them moved their arms for the rest of the movie, and when it ended El tried to ignore the sadness that filled her when he moved away to stretch, unhooking his pinky so casually she wondered if he was embarrassed to have had it there in the first place. The lights came on and they quickly scurried from the theater to avoid the man they'd annoyed, El catching Mike's shoulder as he almost tripped again, only this time *down* the stairs.

His coordination had been absolutely wrecked for the past few months after a monster growth spurt that started at the end of February. He'd gone from being taller than everyone at 5'8 to towering over everyone at 6'3. The doctor his mother had worryingly made him see after the growing pains and tendonitis had set in his long, lanky legs had promised he was probably done, and El sure hoped so. She was about 5'3, making her an entire foot shorter, and she prayed for her own growth spurt to send her up closer to him. It hurt her neck to when she looked up at him, which she wouldn't

admit was most of the time.

“So I asked the concessions guy what Cobra was about and he said it’s some sort of cop thriller? Are you cool with that?”

They were standing outside the entrance to the next movie, munching on the fresh bucket of popcorn he had bought while she ran to the bathroom. She clutched the large Pepsi that had she refused to let him buy. He’d bought the two popcorns and a pack of M&Ms already, and she felt a little guilty since there was no reason for it, she offered him the blue cup and he took it gratefully.

“Um, yes,” she replied, nodding slowly, “like Miami Vice?”

“Probably something kind of like that, yeah.”

He’d never actually watched the TV show she and Hopper were completely dedicated to, but he figured it couldn’t be that far off, right? *Wrong.*

The sheer violence made Mike feel a bit gross. He didn’t really care for thriller/action movies, that was more Lucas’s speed, and while there were definitely some gruesome effects and death in his favorite movies, it had never been this careless. The scenes between the action were pretty much just filler to get to the next car chase or gun fight and it wasn’t even *good* filler. But he couldn’t make himself look away, oddly mesmerized, leaning towards El again to apologize,

“Sorry. This is kind of disgusting,” he muttered, eyes still fixed on the screen, “and seriously stupid. No one needs to fight or kill this much.”

El couldn’t make herself reply, her heart jumped at each gunshot, pulse beginning to race as the people in the supermarket onscreen screamed. There was no real comic relief, nothing to lighten the anxiety that was starting to creep up from her stomach and into her ribcage like a thousand buzzing bees, her fists bunching the skirt of her dress, worrying wrinkles into the soft yellow fabric. She didn’t like this, and *Mike* didn’t like this, there was too much fighting, too many guns and knives, too much hurting.



She didn't want anyone to hurt anymore.

Another car chase and several more gunfights later, the movie was reaching its climax, Stallone's character fighting Brian Thompson's character in some sort of fiery warehouse, the nerve-wracking tension built up by the shrieking music and hellish setting. Cobra's one liner was punctuated by a large hook being thrust into the bad guy's back and it was his screams of pain that finally pushed her over the edge.

She stood abruptly, scooting the random feet and knees that blocked her path out of the way with a subtle nudge of her mind, not letting anything stand between her and the exit. She had to get out. *Now*.

Mike was surprised, but then he noticed the glint of tears that streaked her cheeks as she passed in front of him and jumped up to follow, tripping over feet, knocking over drinks and popcorn with his uncoordinated knees, ignoring the cries out of outrage that followed him as he chased her down the stairs and left the darkened theater. He caught the flash yellow that was her dress exiting the building, pushing through the crowded lobby, muttering insincere apologies as he fought to follow her out the doors.

El was gasping for air, caught in the crowd that had just left their movie, needing to get away, needing to get out of this group of people, needing to be alone, the sidewalk beneath her sneakers leading her around the corner of the building into the darkened alley that offered her solace. She wandered bit further down before cowering in a doorway, covering her face with her hands and wiping away the tears that had slipped out, not wanting to cry. Crying wouldn't fix what was wrong, what was broken inside of her. It wouldn't make her feel better about who she was.

*"El?! El, where are you?!"*

Mike's frantic voice bounced off the walls of the alley and she wished she could sink further into the wall where he wouldn't find her. But she would have no such luck and he turned the corner, relief flooding his face as he spotted her swathed in the shadows. She wiped the last of the tears from her face and put her hand up, signaling him to stop, to not come any closer. She couldn't even make herself look at him, too full of shame.

“El? What’s wrong?” he had stopped, but his questions didn’t, “why did you leave?”

She shook her head. There were too many words inside, too much anger and hatred and ugliness and she didn’t know how to make him understand.

“I’m disgusting,” she whispered, more to herself than to him. His whispers from earlier were the only thing that could describe how she felt and he felt his stomach hit the ground as she borrowed his words.

“What?”

He tried to come closer but his feet were frozen in place.

“El, what are you doing?”

She wiped at her nose and shook her head. He couldn’t come closer, she refused to let him.

“I’m disgusting,” she repeated the word, eyes glancing back towards the front of the theater, “the movie... it was disgusting. Too much hurting and fighting.... and *killing*.” Her hand came up and pointed at herself, digging into her collarbone, trying to explain, trying to bring him to the realization she had already discovered sitting in the sticky theater-seat. Of what she would always be.

“*I hurt. I killed. I’m disgusting.*”

The words hung between them as she stared forward at nothing, only able to see blood pouring from eyes and noses, bodies thumping as they hit the ground, the lights in the hallway flashing brightly in the movie of her mind. She wished she could peel her skin off, to see her own blood and veins and know that she was real and not full of slugs and slime and all the blackness that filled the space where her heart should be.

Mike was frantically trying to move his feet, trying to pull out of her invisible grip so he could go to her. All night she’d been secretly hoping he would slip his hand into hers or wrap an arm around her shoulder, pulling her closer with that reassuring touch only he had.

But now she wouldn't allow him to come closer, needing to keep him safe from the broken monster that still raged inside of her. The darkness she could never blot from her past. He deserved better than that.

"Let me go, El, please," his hands were reaching for her, almost beckoning, eyes pleading, "don't say that about yourself, okay? You're not disgusting. You're... you're amazing and wonderful. *Please*, let me go. Let me help you."

She shook her head, turning her gaze from the memories to his face, feeling shattered but resolute in her decision. *He deserves better than this. Than me.*

"I only hurt," the tears flooded her eyes again, "I can't hurt you. You should be happy."

The rush of emotions were intense that she lost her mental grip a bit and he managed to take a step forward, straining but unyielding in his decision to come closer.

"El, you won't hurt me," he managed another step, "I trust you."

"No."

"Yes. I do. I trust you."

"Don't."

He was less than five feet away, panting at the exertion of fighting against her mental hold on him, but unwilling to give up.

"Just let me come closer, please El, let me save you this time, okay? Like you saved me on the cliff? Remember that?"

Like she could forget.

"I hurt Troy."

"He was threatening to cut Dustin! He had a knife!" He was so close, fingertips almost skimming her arms. "You saved me from jumping off a cliff. That would have *killed* me."

She still wouldn't look at him.

"You helped saved Will, you kept him from giving up before his mom found him."

Another step.

"And then you saved all us from the Demogorgon. You let yourself disappear to save our lives even though it *tore you apart*."

Her chin tilted up and she glanced up at him, eyes still unbelieving and full of pained misery. He could see the battle that was raging inside of her, the belief she'd held onto all these years, that she was still a dangerous monster and not the girl that had completely captivated everyone she met, the girl that loved so fiercely she would sacrifice everything she was. The girl he was hopelessly in love with, something he wanted to tell her but couldn't yet. He tried his best to explain.

"And..." his voice shuddered but he soldiered on, "And then you came back and you saved me again. Do you know how *hard* it was when you were gone? I couldn't eat... I couldn't sleep, it was like everything lost it's color and I was just trying to make everyone else happy because I didn't know how to be happy any more. Even with Will back... it wasn't the same. You were the one that made me so happy. You..." he coughed, almost embarrassed, "...you still make me happy."

Her hazel-brown eyes finally met his ebony ones, her self-loathing swallowed by the unspoken emotion that poured from every fiber of her being. He'd never told her that before, how badly he missed her when she was trapped in the other dimension. How she was the thing that brought the smile back to his face. That she still did. It broke the last bit of blackness inside of her and she finally released her mental hold.

He crashed into her and pulled her to his chest, letting her bury herself like she when she had nightmares in his basement, like when she felt scared of the thunderstorm that shook the house, like the time she'd told him about the abuse of her past for the first time. His arms were home, a safe place to hide from the fears that consumed

her. Nothing, not even her guilt and self-hatred would change that.

"Mike," she breathed his name into his striped polo and he looked down at the top of her curl-covered head, "I'm sorry I'm broken."

*You deserve someone who's whole,* she whispered inside.

"It's... it's okay to be broken," he knew his words were cliché but he needed her to understand, "because you can always pick up the pieces. Broken doesn't mean worthless or unfixable. Sometimes it just means you have to rebuild and make yourself stronger."

His arms held her tighter and she let out a shuddery sigh, his words suddenly turning her perspective inside out. It was hard to imagine that she could do that, that she could turn into something good after being born into pain and hurt and death. Or at the very least, she couldn't do it alone.

"And... if you want, um, I'll... I'll *always* try and help you pick up the pieces, okay?"

An unquantifiable emotion swelled in her chest and she gripped him tighter, unable to understand what she'd ever done to deserve someone as wonderful as him in her life. She'd been fighting so hard to stay friends, to not let her selfish emotions ruin his life. But if he wanted to help her, to be there when she couldn't fix herself, maybe, just maybe, she could let him. The word fell from her lips.

"P-Promise?"

He didn't hesitate.

"Promise."

*And I will make sure to keep my distance  
Say, "I love you," when you're not listening  
And how long can we keep this up, up, up?*

### III.

*And I keep waiting  
For you to take me  
You keep waiting  
To save what we have*

The graphite pencil skidded outside of the carefully sketched line and Mike muttered something incomprehensible as he grabbed the weird, squishy eraser and dabbed at the sketchbook again.

“Do you need more help?” Will asked from where he sat across the Byers’ dinner table, voice sympathetic.

“No, no it’s fine I just have to... “ Mike couldn’t keep the frustration from his voice, “I have to draw this line straight....” he tried to draw it again and failed, “...dammit!”

The messy line had drifted too far again and he slammed the pencil down with a sigh, cursing himself for thinking this would be easier than choir. Junior year had come and so had the time for a fine art elective, the thing Mike had been dreading. He’d put it off first semester, pretending to forget the deadline to join choir ended second quarter, deciding Drawing would be better than having to stand on a stage in front of people and sing. Not that he couldn’t sing, he had an even voice and could pick up harmonies pretty well, but the thought of standing in front of crowd, even in a choir, and *singing* made him break out into a sweat.

“Here, try this pencil, the one you’re using is too hard, you need a softer grade,” Will reached across the dinner table and swapped out his own pencil for the one Mike had been using, “it, um, makes it easier to erase too.”

He couldn’t keep the amusement at his friend’s frustration off his face, smirking a bit as he looked back down at his almost finished portrait. Mike had begged him for help once he realized how much

he sucked at drawing and of course Will had nodded, excited to have someone to sit with as he sketched. Someone other than El, anyways. He glanced towards the clock in the kitchen, realizing she would be home fairly soon. He had to say something, now.

“So like, prom is in, what, three weeks?” he mentioned, the epitome of casual, pretending not to notice how Mike glanced up at him nervously. Ah ha, he did know. That was a good start.

“Oh... yeah. Um,” Mike licked his lips as he tried to think of something to say that was relevant without giving away what he was thinking, “are, um, you going to ask anyone?”

Will shrugged, slowly dragging his eyes up from his drawing to his set of pencils, fiddling with them a bit as he decided which one he wanted to use for shading.

“I haven’t decided yet. Dustin said he asked Brenda Fabrikant and she said no,” he glanced up at Mike again who was now focusing on his drawing, brow furrowed, “but he didn’t seem too shaken up. I don’t know if Lucas has, he wouldn’t tell me.”

There was a beat and Will let the bomb drop.

“And today after lunch Eric Chapman asked El if she would go with him,” he added without breaking his cool tone, casually adding some shading to his drawing.

*Snap!*

He looked up at Mike with a confused expression, wondering what the noise had been. The taller boy’s face was red, not entirely just from embarrassment, as he stared down at his hand, now holding two halves of what had been Will’s pencil. He looked up at Will with frantic eyes, sputtering out an apology as he handed back the pieces.

“Oh my gosh, Will, I’m so sorry I-I totally didn’t mean to, um, shit, I’ll buy you another pencil—I can’t believe I broke it...” he was flustered, attempting to say anything that wasn’t the question he was suddenly dying to ask. Will wasn’t particularly excited that he’d broken one of his better quality pencils, the set had been a birthday gift, but it

really wasn't a huge deal.

"It's... it's fine, I have another one," he noticed how Mike's shoulders were tense, hands almost shaking with either fear or anger, Will couldn't tell which and attempted to soothe the sudden anxiety, "...no worries."

The air between them was tense as Mike struggled to try and find a way to ask the obvious question without seeming like he cared too much. Even though he did care. A lot. A *damn* lot. And it was stupid that he was trying to hide it when it was written all over his face in worried lines.

"So, um, uh, what did—er, I mean, did El, um—"

"She said she wasn't sure. That she was waiting on... something."

A badly hidden sigh of relief breathed across the table, and Will pretended not to notice the way his friend's shoulders relaxed back down. He wasn't finished though.

"She promised she'd give him an answer tomorrow," he looked up at Mike, who was now avoiding eye contact, ripping his stringy eraser into smaller pieces before bunching them back up and rolling them together between his sweaty palms, leg jiggling nervously and making the table vibrate. He almost looked panicked and Will felt a little bad, but he wasn't going to give up until his point had been made.

"Sounded to me like would probably say yes if nothing *else* happens," he kicked it up a notch, trying to make the stakes a little more clear, "I mean, they are lab partners, so it explains why he likes at her all."

A strangled noise left Mike's throat and he swallowed it down, looking painfully embarrassed, trying not to make eye contact and letting out a heavy breath. He was absolutely shredding his eraser, trying to force a pleasant expression, wanting to be happy for her despite the rock that now sat where his stomach used to be. The disappointment was colder than a handful of snow down the front of his shirt, the iciness filling the same spot in his chest. But if it was what she wanted then...



“Well,” he swallowed again, “I mean, he’s a decent guy, at least she’d have fun and I don’t think he’d, um, try anything, you know—”

*Slap!*

Will threw his sketchbook down on the table in frustrated annoyance, unsure of how his tall friend could be such a *dumbass* sometimes. Mike looked down in amazement then back up at Will’s face, unsure exactly his usually quiet friend had become so suddenly... agitated. He pushed his feelings to the side for a second, face visibly concerned.

“You okay, Will?”

Will’s hazel eyes were stormy as he glared across the table. He opened his mouth to answer but was interrupted by the sound of a car pulling up the gravel driveway, blasting music loudly. Jonathan was home from work, which meant he’d picked El up from her English tutor, which meant he was running out of time to make the idiotic dungeon master sitting in front of him understand.

With a quieter sigh he pushed the portrait he’d been working on across the table. Mike looked down, curious, and almost gasped. It was of El, her likeness captured in amazing detail, from the dimple on her right cheek to the laughter that sparkled in her eyes, face warm as she smiled at an unknown joke. He looked back up at Will, still completely oblivious as to why he was showing him this.

Will snapped.

“Could you get any more *dense*? I drew this at lunch last week. She was laughing at *you*. She was smiling at *you*,” he threw his hands up in the air helplessly, “she’s been waiting for *you* to ask her, you... you colossal *moron!*”

He barely got the words out before the front door opened and his siblings scurried into the house. Mike was gaping at his friend, unable to make himself say anything in reply to the sudden tirade that had been thrown into his face. He didn’t get a chance as Jonathan waltzed into the dining room and ruffled his brother’s hair. Will’s face reverted from annoyed frustration to casual cheerfulness as he

smiled back and pushed the hand away from his messy hair.

“How’s the drawing class going?” Jonathan asked as he glanced down at the graphite El and smiled appreciatively, “wow, Will, that’s amazing... it looks just like her. What about you, Mike?”

It was enough to snap him out of his dazed stupor, though his mind was definitely racing, and he sheepishly held up his embarrassing sketch. Jonathan tried to be polite.

“That’s, uh, a really cool lamp.”

“It’s supposed to be a tulip...” Mike look forlornly down at it again but immediately looked back up at the sound of El’s laughter breezing through the doorway.

All of the air left his lungs at the sight of her, the sparkle that Will had caught so masterfully shining in her eyes. He was finding it hard to believe that someone as amazing as her, someone as selfless and perfectly beautiful like her, would want to go to prom with him. Was it just because they’d gone to the Snow Ball together back in middle school? Remembering that night always made him flush happily, as they slow-danced to The Cars and she rested her head on his chest. She’d kissed him afterwards, outside in the parking lot, and shyly said thank you, telling him in her simple way that she was happy that he’d helped her to find a home and feel safe for the first time in her entire life. That’s all it had been. He assumed.

Now she walked in during the conversation and couldn’t help but giggle, trying to look sympathetic as she took in the drawing of the flower-lamp he was still holding up in the air.

“Isn’t Will helping you?” she glanced at her brother with a raised eyebrow and Will shrugged.

“I gave him the lines to follow... I can’t draw it *for* him.”

They all laughed at Mike’s expense and even though he flushed a brighter red he wasn’t too upset. He knew he sucked at this and that they didn’t really have mean intent. Realizing he was staring at El as she laughed, he quickly shifted his gaze down to the table.

He couldn't help it. Of course she was nice to look at, swaths of honey-brown curls and warm hazel-brown eyes that made it easy to get drawn in, but it was more than just that to Mike. He would never admit that one of the main reasons he stared, across the D&D table, out of the corner his eye during movie nights, over plates of Eggos, was because part of him was afraid to look away. The last time he'd looked away, eyes full of tears, hands over his ears trying to drown out her enraged scream and the shrieking monster... she'd vanished. He wasn't planning on making that mistake again.

He risked another glance at her, hoping his blush was calming down. Unlikely.

Will noticed and raised his eyebrows, making a "come on, man" face and jerking his chin towards his sister. Mike swallowed and tried to gather his courage, Will's revelation about her feelings giving him the boost he needed.

"H-Hey, uh, El?"

He got up from his chair and she looked at him from where she stood on the other side of the table, still smiling.

"Yeah?"

"Can, um, can I, uh, talk to you for a second?" he sputtered, realizing that he couldn't have picked a worse way to ask. *It sounds like I'm trying to break up with her or something...*

Jonathan and Will exchanged a knowing glance and made the motions to leave the dining room, but Mike shook his head at them, quickly swerving around the table and walking backwards towards the front door. He almost tripped over his own backpack and flailed for a second before catching himself and looking sheepish. El giggled again, but rolled her eyes and threw her own backpack onto the table before following him.

"Sure, Mike," she smiled but threw Will a questioning look that he shrugged off, trying to look clueless.

Once the front door closed behind them both of the brothers sighed

in relief and exchanged another glance. Finally.

*So I'll make sure to keep my distance  
Say, "I love you," when you're not listening  
And how long can we keep this up, up, up?*

It was late March, and while the days were mostly warm, a cold front had pushed through again, bringing cold rain and making the breeze that whispered across the front porch chilly. El shivered a bit, her high-waisted white cute-offs and pastel blue polo not offering a whole lot of protection from the cooler weather as the sun set behind the house. Without really thinking Mike shrugged the navy hoodie he was wearing off his shoulders and handed it to her, admiring her grateful smile as she pulled it on and snuggled into his warmth still left inside.

"El, um..." now that he was here alone with her he had no idea what to say, where to begin. He knew he wanted to ask her about prom, but... what exactly? She, however, was used to his awkward attempts to start conversation.

"How was Honors Bio?" she questioned, reaching up to tuck a stray curl behind her ear.

"Oh, it was fine, um, I had to dissect another earthworm, which is so dumb, I mean, we did that in regular bio. I'm pretty sure most earthworms look the same on the inside..." he realized he'd started rambling, traveling far away from the topic he actually wanted to talk about, "but, um, that's not why—I mean, I don't want to talk about biology class..."

"Okay..." she tilted her head, looking up at him through her lashes with a smirk, "what do you want to talk about?"

His palms were sweating already and his mouth suddenly went dry. *Just get it out you stupid idiot*, he berated himself and then

immediately vomited out the word.

“P-Prom?”

He winced, his voice almost squeaking as he stuttered out the most basic idea of what he wanted to say. Her eyebrows lifted and one of her hands, lost in the sleeve of his hoodie, suddenly reached up to tug at one of her curls, the thing he knew she did when she was nervous or unsure.

“Um, I mean, like, are you going?” He winced again.

“Probably...” her voice made it sound like a question.

“Are you going with... someone?”

The sun was gone now, and just over the tree line lightning flashed, bringing faint rumbles of thunder with it. Mike’s insides churned like a violent hurricane as he waited for her answer.

“No...”

He was flying, heart thudding wildly.

“...but I think I want to,” her tone sounded hopeful.

He was falling, heart sinking.

She’d made up her mind about Eric then. Will had been wrong. Something twisted his gut painfully, maybe hurt, maybe jealousy. Most likely both.

“Oh, um, okay,” he couldn’t keep the disappointment from his voice, entire body slumping. She noticed, of course.

“Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“Are... are you?”

She was looking up at him, eyes blinking brightly as the lightning flashed closer. He mumbled out an answer, shoving his hands into his

pockets and not looking at her, focusing on the pock-marked wood of the porch beneath his feet.

“I guess not.”

It was quiet between them, the thunder slowly booming louder as the silence stretched, neither sure what to say now. Both were disappointed, reading the situation completely wrong, El assuming he didn't want to go with her, Mike assuming she wanted to go with someone else, someone better. He couldn't take it any longer, reaching up to scratch the back of his neck like a nervous tic.

“So, you're going with Eric then?” his voice was tight.

“Wha—” her head snapped up to look at him, “*What?*”

“I hope you guys have *fun*,” he tried to sound sincere, looking miserable instead.

Eric really was a nice guy. He'd grown up in Hawkins and, like Mike, was well liked, but unlike Mike he was considerably more popular with the other girls in school, with wavy blonde hair and buff arms that made him the star pitcher on the baseball team. Just the thought of El surrounded by *his* arms, laughing at *his* jokes made Mike's insides quiver with a jealous rage, face flaming, fist clenching around the car keys in his pockets. His temper kicked in and he turned away from her surprised face, stomping to his car, figuring there was nothing more to say, deciding he would swing by and pick up his drawing stuff later, wanting to just be alone to sulk.

*Too late*, an internal voice taunted.

He was halfway across the yard when her small hands caught his elbow, pulling him to a stop just as lightning lit up the sky overhead.

“Mike!” her voice was almost drowned out by the thunder that crashed, but he heard her, heard her tone of desperation and swung back around, suddenly concerned she was afraid of the storm.

Her brow was furrowed, she looked like she was in pain, and as lightning lit up her eyes he could see the confusion and hurt that pooled inside of them.

"I'm not going with *Eric*," she let go of his arm, pulling her hands up to her chest almost as if to try and hold in the heart that threatened to leap out of it, "I mean... I don't want to. I want..."

The lightning flashed blindingly, interrupting her words and lighting up the entire yard, highlighting the space that stretched between them. Thunder crackled at the same, crashing and booming and making it sound as if the ground was breaking apart beneath their feet as the entire world shook around them.

It drowned out what she had finally managed to say, but Mike didn't need to hear it because he saw the way it left her mouth, the way her lips formed around the words, saying the thing that he needed to know, the thing that after years and years of waiting, she was able to spit out.

"I want *you*."

The sky broke open right then, sheets of raining descending in a full-on downpour, soaking the two teens within seconds. Mike frantically pushed his sopping bangs out of his eyes, trying to look at her through the pounding rain, to make sure he hadn't imagined what she said. She was still looking up at him, nervously blinking through the rain that assaulted her eyelashes. The courage he'd been lacking for so long surged through him and he reached out and grabbed her shoulders, looking into the hazel-brown eyes that had struck him speechless for so many years. Not anymore.

"El!"

He had to yell to be heard over the storm that now raged around them.

"Do you want to go to prom with me?!"

Her entire face brightened, a smile lighting up her eyes and stretching across her face. She wanted to leap into his arms, heart nearly bursting from happiness, but an unpleasant thought froze her in her tracks and she looked up at him, suddenly cautious, another question twisting her lips into a frown. The storm that been so fierce only seconds ago died down a bit, the rain still pouring in wind-

whipped sheets across the yard but the thunder quieting.

“As... as friends?”

He reached up, tentative and unsure, but pushed a cluster of sopping-wet curls out of her face and behind her ear with a gentle tenderness, licking his lips nervously and blinking more rain out of his eyes.

“I was hoping... I mean...” he shook his head at the question, the intense happiness that had surged within him at her confession suddenly squelched by nervousness again, “No. Not as friends... as like maybe, um, something... more?”

Her eyes lit up again and then she gave in, throwing herself onto him and wrapping her arms around his neck to pull him down to her. He tilted his face to meet hers and then their lips collided and they were kissing, almost desperately, grasping onto each other in the downpour, pulling back only to take a breath, smiling against each other’s mouths. She placed another kiss on his lips, this one less frantic and more sweet, so different from the ones they shared before for comfort or reassurance. He leaned back for a second, a teasing grin quirking his lips.

“So, um, is that yes?”

“Yes!”

Smiling brighter than the lightning that still flashed around them, she nodded her head, reaching up to tug at the dark bangs that were falling into his eyes again. Moving to kiss him she stumbled a bit and missed, pecking his jawline instead, hands moving down to rest against his chest. It felt surreal to both of them, that the thing they had both longed for so long was finally a reality. His eyes danced as they met hers and he marveled at the way she almost glowed.

No, wait, she was literally glowing as headlights pulled up the driveway and fell onto the two drenched teens standing in the middle of the yard. The beige Blazer parked and Hop jumped out, holding a standard-issue black umbrella and running around the side of the car to cover Joyce with it as she slid out of the car, holding grocery bags.



“What in the *hell* are you kids *doing*?” Hop yelled to them as he and Joyce came closer.

Mike and El were still clutching each other tightly, but Mike dropped his arms a bit, suddenly nervous in the presence of her mom and sort-of dad. She clutched onto his arm instead, pressing herself against his warmth as her rain-soaked clothes made her realize how cold she was. Mike noticed she was shivering violently and wished he had another jacket to give her, instead wrapping an arm around her shoulder and pulling her a little closer.

“Come and get out of the rain!” Joyce was beckoning them towards the shelter of the porch where she now stood, not angry or upset, but a little confused as to why they would willingly give themselves colds by running around in the frigid rain. They didn’t argue, quickly heading back to the house where Joyce observed their faces, noticing how there was a certain warmth between the two despite both of them shivering.

She sighed at their dripping clothes and hair. “Let me go in and grab you some towels, okay?”

Both of the adults disappeared inside and Mike turned to El, unable to resist pulling her into his arms again, still a bit hesitant but warming as she immediately tucked her face into the crook of his neck, wrapping her arms around his waist. He nuzzled his chin against the side of her head, lips brushing her temple, suddenly unable to feel the cold.

“Mike?”

“Hm?”

“What took you so long?”

She untucked her head and looked up at him, drowning him in her widened eyes. Her teeth were chattering a bit and her hair was plastered to her head, the occasional stray curl managing to spring up, making her look like a waterlogged poodle. *God, she’s so beautiful*, he thought before breaking the spell he’d fallen under with a shake of his head so he could answer her.

“Um, you mean to ask you?”

“Yeah.”

“Well...” he was suddenly afraid he’d sound like a total wuss, but decided to just be honest anyways since that had worked pretty well so far. “I was afraid you’d say no...” she furrowed her brow and he hastily continued, “because I thought, I mean, um, that you only wanted to be friends, since uh, that’s all we’ve really been which is totally fine I’m not.... er, complaining. But, um, I kind of wanted more and I didn’t want to ruin our friendship because I love you that’s unfai—”

They both froze, his eyes widening in terror as he realized he had in fact just confessed that out loud in a totally nonchalant manner, the opposite of romantic or sweet. This was not how it was supposed to happen.

He gasped outright, choking on his own spit and immediately breaking into a violent fit of coughing, dislodging the girl who had been clinging to him, and gasping for air. El rubbed his back gently, looking concerned but unable to keep a smile from quirking her lips, trying to help him get oxygen back into his lungs as they violently tried to expel the saliva. *Did he really just say that he loves me? Did I hear that or am I crazy?* After he caught his breath she let herself ask, eyes shining.

“Mike did you, um...” he was breathing again, but raggedly, face a vibrant shade of red underneath the dull porch light. She paused, her voice oddly high-pitched, “...did you say you *loved* me?”

“Ah,” he coughed again, “I mean, um, I don’t—I can’t, er, well,” he sputtered, afraid of what what would happen if he said yes, “I... is it okay if I did?”

“Um, yes,” she took in a deep breath, “if it’s okay that... that I do too?”

It was question, not a statement, both of them too nervous to say it outright. Mike’s heart was racing as he looked down at her, not believing that not only had those words had left his mouth, but she

had repeated them. Well, not exactly *repeated* the phrase, but close enough. He felt himself shaking with what had to be joy, feeling like he could burst with happiness as a large and totally doofy grin lit up his entire face. The blissful feeling of relief and near-euphoria made him giddy, and instead of just saying yes he tried to play it off, still grinning.

"I mean, um, I'm cool with it if you are."

"You're a dork, Mike," she didn't let him get away with it, scrunching up her nose but still smiling, "but I'm... cool."

"Cool?"

"Cool," she assured him, reaching out to shyly grab his hand and lace their frozen fingers.

He stared down at their hands for a second, smiling more softly, her touch making warmth radiate up his arm and to his heart. It was comforting, knowing she was real, that what had just been said between them was real. That she loved him.

"Hey, El..." she looked up at him, "how come you didn't tell me? That you wanted to go to prom, I mean?"

She'd asked him the same thing, so he thought it was a fair question, especially since she'd just admitted that she *loved* him. Why hadn't she let him know? Given him a hint? If it wasn't for Will he'd still be assuming that they were meant to stay friends.

"I was waiting for you, 'cause..." she weighed her words, trying to find the right ones, "I'm messy and broken and you're so... *good*. I was afraid you wouldn't want *me*. So I waited. For you to decide." It was fairly straightforward but she paused before finishing her thought. "And... girls can't ask guys to dances and stuff... that's weird, right?"

He couldn't keep himself from rolling his eyes. Partly at the idea that he wouldn't want her and also at the mildly sexist bullshit she'd let prevent her from giving him a damn clue.

"El, girls can do whatever they want. You could have asked me if you

really wanted to.”

“Oh,” she looked mildly upset that she hadn’t, but then shrugged, “well, it’s okay. I liked this too.”

“Really? You like almost drowning in a thunderstorm and freezing your butt off?” he seemed a bit incredulous—there were definitely way better ways to ask someone to prom. In fact even now he could of several ways, at least two of them Star Wars related, that he could have done it, feeling ashamed at not giving her a better experience. He wondered how Eric had asked her, feeling a bit glum as he was lost in a rose petal filled fantasy, only coming back at the sound of her reassuring voice.

“I liked it because it was *you*,” she shrugged easily, “and um...” she bit her lip, a little more nervous about saying the other reason, watching as he he raised his eyebrows.

“Cause I love you.”

It was still too new, and she blushed pink, feeling warm and fuzzy and shivery inside. Mike looked down at his feet to make sure he wasn’t actually floating. His Nikes, although quite soggy, were still planted firmly on the ground and he almost shook from the excitement pounding in his veins. He pulled her a little closer.

“Well, um, that’s good, I mean... since I love you too.”

It was freeing. A weight he hadn’t realized he’d been carrying for the past four years was lifted from his shoulders, the thing he’d avoided talking about since he’d first met her, both of them drenched in rain then too, was finally out in the open for her to see.

She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him down but not kissing him, instead just pressing her forehead against his and closing her eyes. It was the first time either of them had been that close without allowing the guilt they’d carried to creep in between and keep them apart again. The rest of the world faded away, the softly falling rain a quiet, swishy symphony as they simply stood there and breathed each other in, hearts pressed together through sodden clothes. She nuzzled her nose against his and he

sighed, utterly content. Well, almost.

He gave in and stooped the rest of the way down to kiss her, closing the last bit of distance between them.

*Make sure to keep my distance*

*Say, "I love you," when you're not listening*

*How long 'til we call this love, love, love?*

**Author's Note:**

soRRY IT WAS SO LONG

i wanted each part to be like 1000 words tops and part three was just like nAH sorry.

i promise i'm working on other stories too, but the inspiration for this one came outta nowhere and i had to write it as soon as it hit. with any luck more inspiration will hit and i'll get some stuff done. i sure hope so.

kudos are cool. comments are amazing. tell me how you feel. i love that shit.